

Sanders's Screwy Mideast Strategy

Out of fear of offending the power centers of Official Washington, Democrats won't or can't formulate a coherent foreign policy. Even Sen. Bernie Sanders says the solution to Mideast chaos is more Saudi intervention when Saudi intervention in support of Sunni extremists is the heart of the problem, writes Sam Hussein.

By Sam Hussein

There's an old joke about two elderly men at a Catskill resort. One complains: "The food here is horrible." The other vigorously agrees: "Yeah, I know – and the portions are so damn small!" Along those lines, several writers have noted that Sen. Bernie Sanders has been scant in terms of his foreign policy – small portions. But there's also the question of quality.

A problem with Sanders's limited articulation of a foreign policy is that his most passionately stated position is extremely regressive and incredibly dangerous. Sanders has actually pushed for the repressive Saudi Arabian regime to engage in more intervention in the Mideast.

In discussing the Islamic State (or ISIS), Sanders has talked about Saudi Arabia being the solution. His comments are couched in language that seems somewhat critical, but the upshot is we need more Saudi influence and intervention in the region. In effect, more and bigger proxy wars, which have already taken the lives of hundreds of thousands in Syria and could further rip apart Iraq, Libya and Yemen.

As a Democratic presidential candidate, Sanders has made this point repeatedly – and prominently. In February with Wolf Blitzer on CNN, Sanders said: "This war is a battle for the soul of Islam and it's going to have to be the Muslim countries who are stepping up. These are billionaire families all over that region. They've got to get their hands dirty. They've got to get their troops on the ground. They've got to win that war with our support. We cannot be leading the effort."

What? Why should a U.S. progressive be calling for more intervention by the Saudi monarchy? Do we really want Saudi troops in Syria, Iraq, Libya and Yemen and who knows where else (and that's assuming you don't count some of the Saudi-financed militants and extremist proxies operating in those countries as Saudi irregular troops)?

You'd think that perhaps someone like Sanders would say that we have to break our decades-long backing of the corrupt Saudi regime – but no, he wants to

dramatically expand it.

Even worse, after the Saudis started bombing Yemen with U.S. government backing earlier this year, killing thousands and leading to what the UN is now calling a "humanitarian catastrophe," and suffering that is "almost incomprehensible," Sanders continued to promote this scheme of getting the Saudis to do more.

In another interview again with Wolf Blitzer in May, Sanders did correctly note that as a result of the Iraq invasion, "we've destabilized the region, we've given rise to Al Qaeda, ISIS." But then he called for more outside intervention from Saudi Arabia: "What we need now, and this is not easy stuff, I think the President is trying, you need to bring together an international coalition, Wolf, led by the Muslim countries themselves!

"Saudi Arabia is the third largest military budget in the world. They're going to have to get their hands dirty in this fight. We should be supporting, but at the end of the day this is fight over what Islam is about, the soul of Islam, we should support those countries taking on ISIS."

So, progressives in the U.S. are supposed to look toward the Saudi monarchy to save the soul of Islam? The Saudis have pushed the teachings of the fundamentalist Wahabbism sect that's been deforming Islam for decades. This extremism helped give rise to Al Qaeda and now ISIS. In other words, the Saudi royals have already been "getting their hands dirty." It's a bit like someone saying the Koch Brothers need to get more involved in U.S. politics by "getting their hands dirty."

But if your point is to build up the next stage of the U.S. government's horrific role in the Mideast, it kind of makes sense. The U.S. government helped ensure the Saudis would dominate the Arabian Peninsula from the formation of the nation state of Saudi Arabia – a nation named after a family. In return, the Saudis let the U.S. take the lead in extracting oil there.

The Saudis also favored investing funds from their oil wealth largely in the West over building up the region, what the activist scholar Eqbal Ahmed called separating the material wealth of the Mideast from the mass of the people of the region. Saudi Arabia buys U.S. weapons to further solidify the "relationship" and to ensure its military dominance.

During the Arab Spring of 2011, the Saudis and other Gulf monarchies deformed the Arab uprisings, which transformed oppressive but basically secular and minimally populist regimes into failed states and gave rise to groups like ISIS. What has happened in the Mideast since the ouster of Egypt's dictator Hosni Mubarak and the other Arab uprisings is that the Saudis have been

strengthened. Saudi Arabia has largely called the shots in the region.

Both the Tunisian and Yemeni dictators fled to Saudi Arabia. Mubarak himself was urged not to resign by the Saudis, and the Saudis are now the main backers of the military regime in Cairo, which ousted the popularly elected Muslim Brotherhood government.

One has to wonder why Sanders is taking this position. Is there a domestic constituency called "Americans for Saudi Domination of the Arab World"? The opposite would seem to be the case. There would surely be more popular support if someone would say: "We've got to stop backing dictatorships like the Saudis. They behead people. They are tyrannical. They have a system of male guardianship. Why the hell are they an ally?"

But Sanders is unwilling to break with the U.S.-Saudi alliance that has done so much damage to both the Arab people and the American people. Now, we have what amounts to an Israeli-Saudi alliance (with both countries viewing Iran as their principal enemy) and it must be music to the ears of pro-Israeli journalists like Wolf Blitzer for Sanders to be calling for more U.S. backing of Saudi power.

Some progressives have argued that Sanders's candidacy is valuable in that whether he wins or loses he is putting the issue of income inequality front and center. But if his candidacy is to be lauded for raising issues of economic inequality and educating and galvanizing the public around that, it's fair to ask why he is deforming public discussion on another crucial issue, U.S. policy in the Middle East.

If the position of the most prominent "progressive" on the national stage is for more Saudi military intervention in the affairs of its neighbors, what does that do to public understanding of the Mideast and the dialogue between the people of the United States and Muslim countries?

If the U.S. further subcontracts control of the Mideast to the Saudi regime, the setbacks and disappointments for peace and justice in the region during the Obama years will be small potatoes by comparison. If Sanders's plan is implemented making the Saudi royals and other oil-rich monarchs the enforcers of order in the Mideast the likelihood is for open-ended warfare.

And that would likely mean that all the other things that Sanders is talking about regarding economic inequality would be out the window. He himself has noted that "wars drain investment at home." Or does Sanders think it's all good if he can set up a scheme whereby the Saudis pay the bills and use their own troops for Mideast wars that the U.S. government supports?

The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. in his “Beyond Vietnam” speech called that war a “demonic destructive suction tube” taking funds from the war on poverty. But he also referred to deeper reasons based on moral grounds for opposing war. But Sanders rarely touches on those other reasons. It’s as though we’ve learned nothing about blowback since 9/11.

Contrast Sanders’s call for an escalation of Saudi Arabia’s proxy wars with how insurgent Labour Party MP Jeremy Corbyn – whose campaign to lead Labour in the UK has caught fire addresses the issue, challenging the British establishment about arming the Saudis:

“Will the Minister assure me that the anti-corruption laws will apply to arms deals and to British arms exports? Will they involve forensic examination of any supposed corruption that has gone on between arms sales and regimes in other parts of the world rather than suspending Serious Fraud Office inquiries, as in the case of an investigation into the Al-Yamamah arms contract with Saudi Arabia?”

A section of Corbyn’s website highlights video of his remarks at the House of Parliament last month as he relentlessly criticized human rights violations by the Saudi regime.

Instead of adopting Corbyn’s human rights and rule-of-law perspective, Sanders has used Saudi Arabia’s massive military spending to argue that it should further dominate the region. Unexamined is the \$60 billion arms deal between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia that Obama signed off on in 2010 and Saudi plans to enhance the monarchy’s military capabilities. The BBC reported that Saudi “Prince Turki al-Faisal called for ‘a unified military force, a clear chain of command’ at a high level regional security conference in Riyadh, the Saudi capital.”

So Sanders and Saudi planners seem to be on the same page. But does Sanders really believe that expanded war by an autocratic state in a critical region will breed good outcomes? Sanders doesn’t seem to take money from Lockheed Martin – though he’s backed their F-35 slated to be based in Vermont – but his stance on Saudi Arabia must bring a smile to the faces of Military-Industrial Complex bigwigs.

The Black Lives Matter movement has moved Sanders to “say the names” of Sandra Bland and others who are victims of police abuse and violence. Those striving for peace and justice around the world need to do the same regarding Sanders and U.S. foreign policy.

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